

## Weekend Escape To Cartagena



Tropical and sultry, its candy-colored colonial houses draped with bougainvillea and its plazas buzzing with fruit vendors and flamboyantly costumed dancers, [Cartagena](#) carries a heady whiff of the exotic. Days move to a slower rhythm, while nights are electric with possibility. Horses pull carriages over cobblestone streets, and musicians amble across plazas. It's worlds away from home.

Yet it's surprisingly close. JetBlue's 4.5-hour flight from New York is about to run (seasonally) six days a week, and flights from Miami and Fort Lauderdale are even easier. Getting there isn't any harder than visiting many islands in the Caribbean.

And now that Colombia has become safer and gotten past its PR problem, Cartagena is more compelling than ever. Increased interest in traveling here, along with that easy-peasy New York flight, has led the city into a renaissance this past year, with Colombians who had lived overseas coming back to open stylish boutiques, restaurants and small hotels (and American expats coming to work in them), and bigger investors close behind.

It's a very different city from the Cartagena I fell in love with about four years ago, but no less dreamy. Back then, its visitors were mostly cruise ship day-trippers and backpackers, and my family asked repeatedly if I would be safe. But now, while it's still not a gilded-taps-luxury sort of place, it's grown up enough to please travelers with higher expectations. And this time, I just heard expressions of envy.

The best argument for going to Cartagena right now is the Getsamani neighborhood, just outside the walls of the old city. Four years ago it was home to backpacker hostels, a couple good old-school restaurants and the enduring Afro-Cuban club [Café Havana](#). Three years from now it will be home to a Four Seasons hotel. But now it's smack-dab in the sweet spot, with appealing street art, cool new watering holes like the three-story (including rooftop) [Malagana](#) and restaurants such as [Demente](#), where Bogota-born owner Nicolas Wiesner says there must be something demented about moving to Cartagena to open a Spanish-tapas-style restaurant, though his design-forward renovation of the area's oldest house and well-executed menu—order the burrata—speak more of genius than of madness. One Cartagena publicist compared the neighborhood to New York's Bushwick and another to SoHo; the New York journalists I was with (on a sponsored press trip) settled on Williamsburg ten years ago. On my first Cartagena trip, I was encouraged to take a taxi to lunch in Getsamani. This time I walked home from Havana (with a male friend) at 2 a.m.

But for now, one of Cartagena's primary charms is that its best (and virtually only) places to stay are the tiny, independent, mostly Colombian-owned boutique hotels in onetime mansions in UNESCO-land.